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AIMS IN AMERICAN EDUCATION¹

By the HONORABLE CHARLES EVANS HUGHES
Secretary of State

It is idle for those who are distressed by some of the tendencies of our time to indulge the notion that there will be a diminution of popular control or increase of respect for mere tradition or authority. The will of the people will be expressed and slight hindrances will be interposed to the satisfaction of their desires. As the restraints we believe to be important to our security and progress must be self-imposed, there is no reason why we should entertain the delusion that democracy will confer blessings except in so far as it represents the rule of an intelligent and cultured people.

We cannot fail to be gratified by the evidence on every hand of an increased demand for educational opportunity, and it is most encouraging to observe the extraordinary efforts that are being made, especially in the field of higher education, to provide new facilities. Public funds are available to an unprecedented extent, while the outpourings of private benevolence have gone beyond anything that we have hitherto deemed to be possible. But it is also apparent that there is much confusion with respect to standards and aims and that there will be little gain in considering the mechanism of education until we have re-examined the more fundamental needs.

It is not likely that there will be lack of opportunity for vocational education,— for the sort of training which will fit men and women to earn a living. The exigencies of our complex life are too apparent and the rewards too obvious to admit of neglect; and we shall have whatever vocational or technical schools are required. But democracy cannot live on bread alone. It is not

¹ Read at the General Meeting of the National Education Association, Boston, July 4, 1922.

enough that one shall be able to earn a living, or a good living. This is the foundation but not the structure. What is needed is to have life more abundantly.

From the standpoint of the individual the exclusively materialistic view is inadmissible, for the individual life should be enriched with the ampler resources of a wider culture. What is most important, however, in view of our social and civic needs, is that the door of hope should be kept open by maintaining the opportunities and standards of general education,—thus giving to those who start amid the direst necessities and with the most slender advantages, the chance to rise. This is of especial importance to our working people, who are not to be viewed as mere economic units but as our co-laborers in the great enterprise of human progress. The American ideal—and it must be maintained if we are to mitigate disappointment and unrest—is the ideal of equal educational opportunity, not merely for the purpose of enabling one to know how to earn a living, and to fit into an economic status more or less fixed, but of giving play to talent and aspiration and to development of mental and spiritual powers.

It is impossible to provide a system of general education and ignore the need of discipline. The sentimentalists are just as dangerous as the materialists. No one will dispute the importance of making study interesting, of recognizing the individual bent or special gifts. But the primary lesson for the citizens of democracy is self-control, and this is achieved only through self-discipline. As I look back upon my own experience, I find that the best lessons of life were the hardest. Even along the line of special aptitude it is the severe mental exercise, the overcoming of real obstacles, that counts. My mother's insistence on the daily exercises in mental arithmetic has been worth more to me than all the delightful dallings with intellectual pleasures I have ever had. Life is not a pastime and democracy is not a holiday excursion. It needs men trained to think, whose mental muscles are hard with toil, who know how to analyze and discriminate, who stand on the firm foundation of conviction which is made

possible only by training in the processes of reason. The sentimentalists must not be allowed to ruin us by dissipating the energy that should be harnessed for our varied needs.

When we consider the true object of education, to give the training which will enable one to make the most—that is the best—of oneself, we must realize that the foundation should be laid in a few studies of the highest value in self-discipline, and that there should be supplied every incentive to attain that mental and spiritual culture which connotes, not merely knowledge and skill, but character. This means self-denial, hard work, the inspiration of teachers with vision, and an appreciation of the privileges and obligations of citizenship in democracy.

In the elementary schools, it means that sort of training which insists, at whatever cost, on the mastery by the student of the subject before him, on accuracy—the lack of which, I regret to say, is now conspicuous in students of all grades—the correct use of our language, and the acquisition of that modicum of information which everyone should possess.

In the secondary schools (our high schools and academies) it means that we should stop scattering. There is at present a bewildering and unsuccessful attempt at comprehensiveness. It fails of its purpose in giving neither adequate information nor discipline. It asks too much of the student, and too little. I believe that we need to have a few fundamental, substantial studies which are thoroughly mastered. I am one of those who believe in the classical and mathematical training, and I do not think that we have found any satisfactory substitute for it. But the important point is the insistence upon concentration and thoroughness. The function of the secondary school is not to teach everything but really to teach something, to lay the basis for the subsequent, and more definitely specialized, intellectual endeavor.

I think, also, that we have done too much to encourage intellectual vagrancy in college. Of course there should be opportunity to select courses having in view definite scholastic aims, but we have gone so far that a "college education," outside of

technical schools, may mean little or nothing. It is a time for reconstruction and for the establishment of definite requirements by which there will be secured better mental discipline, more accurate information, and appropriate attention to the things of deepest value which make for the enrichment of the whole life of the student.

We have given too scant attention to the demands of training for citizenship. This implies adequate knowledge of our institutions, of their development and actual working. It means more than this in a world of new intimacies and complexities. It means adequate knowledge of other peoples, and for this purpose there is nothing to take the place of the humanities, of the study of literature and history. When I speak of the study of history, I do not mean a superficial review, but the earnest endeavor to understand the life of peoples, their problems and aspirations. And at this time it is not simply or chiefly the history of a distant past that it is most important to know; it is recent history, with sufficient acquaintance with the past to understand the extraordinary happenings and developments which have taken place in our own time, so that through a just and clear discernment our young men and women may properly relate themselves to the duties and opportunities of their generation.

We must not forget the many schools of experience, in one or more of which every American must take his course, but what we have regarded as the American character, that which we delight to praise as the dominant American opinion because of its clear, practical, and intelligent view of affairs, has resulted from the inter-action of the influences of the colleges and universities on the one hand and of these schools of experience on the other. We cannot afford to do without either. And the most pressing need of our day is attention to the organization of American education.